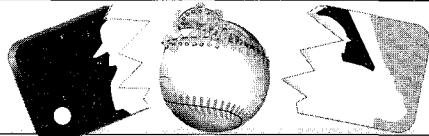




"The owners and players deserve each other. I'd be happy to start watching Japanese baseball."

— Brad Thompson, an American expatriate who coaches a baseball team in London.

MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL STRIKE: DAY 8



"It's kind of dumb. The (players) are making more money than the president."

— Ryan Mondragon, 12, at a Modesto (Calif.) A's game.



"There's so much to love about the minors."

Versatility a must for operating team in minors

By Mel Antonen
USA TODAY

SALEM, Va. — Groundskeeper Stan Macko arrives at 7:30 a.m. in rain at Municipal Field, so he makes an emergency telephone call to the general manager, who calls his assistant, who calls the three other front-office employees.

By 8 a.m. the six slip and slide while tugging a bulky blue tarp that sticks to infield mud. An hour later, the mission is accomplished.

"This is our 32nd tarp-pull of the season," says Sam Lazerro, GM of the Salem Buccaneers of the Class A Carolina League. "We've kept track since 1989, when we had 51 tarp-pulls, a franchise record."

Who needs the big leagues? While finger-pointing players and owners continue to argue about how to split \$1.8 billion, the spirit of going to the park for fun lives on with 216 minor-league teams across the USA, Dominican Republic, Mexico and Canada.

Hollywood made the Carolina League's Durham Bulls famous, but the Buccaneers are aiming for their 12th consecutive season — including eight record-breakers — of growing attendance. In '93, the Buccaneers, an affiliate of the Pittsburgh Pirates, drew 145,657 fans.

"We're the only team in baseball that can say that," says assistant GM Dennis Roberge.

An even dozen should be no problem, as Buccaneers fans come to bid farewell to ancient Municipal Field, which has a grandstand built in 1939, with seats from Yankee Stadium used in Babe Ruth's day. Next season brings a new state-of-the-art stadium:

That means outfielders will not have to maneuver around light poles and crash into cinder-block walls. It means no more uphill hikes to the bathrooms, and public-address announced Craig Wright will not have to bring his cassette deck for between-inning music.

"Next year, I'm told we're going to have two people for this job, one to handle the sound effects," Wright says.

Buccaneers manager Trent Jewell will not miss the old



MAN OF MANY TALENTS: Sam Lazerro, the general manager of the Class A Salem (Va.) Buccaneers, pitches in to roll the tarpaulin onto the field. Lazerro says pulling the tarp is the only time he questions his career in baseball.



FUN GAME: Fans Ron Gilley and fiance Terri Argabright, left, met at a game. Gilley is a season ticketholder — \$140 for 70 games — and his seat has a gold name plate.



PASSING THE TIME: Salem players Lou Collier and Mitch House play cards in the Bucs' locker room while it rains outside.

place. He wouldn't mind a park where the fences aren't 270 feet from the plate, dugouts don't point toward middle infielders and an 8-0 first-inning lead doesn't mean you still have a war on your hands."

But Jewell doesn't want to see the new stadium.

"That would mean I'd stay at the same level," Jewell says.

Class A players make an average of \$1,200. They are close to the strike issues, yet far away. Players say they strike because they want to pave the way for future players.

Minor league ballparks get more modern, but the intimacy and love of game doesn't change. Salem is four hours south of Washington, D.C., but seems like a million miles from the never-ending argument of salary caps.

Local fan Ron Gilley is an example. He pays \$140 for a season ticket for 70 games. He sits at the top of the grand-

stand, 12 rows up, behind home plate. His seat is labeled with a gold name plate.

Gilley showed up in steady rain an hour early Tuesday night for a Buccaneers game against the Winston-Salem (N.C.) Spirit, a Cincinnati farm team. He was a major league fan who never had heard of minor league baseball until the '81 strike.

The strike was going on, and I needed my fix," Gilley says. "I had to go somewhere. Now, I don't need major league baseball. Half the Pirates' roster are former Salem players."

Alice and Judy Williams, a mother-daughter combination who drove three hours from Lexington, N.C., to see the Spirit, make trips to Atlanta and Cincinnati to big-league teams, but they prefer the minors.

They had reserved tickets for Tuesday night's game, but when they arrived at the park, the tickets weren't at the win-

dow yet. They were instructed to go into the game and worry about it later.

"That's not going to happen at a Braves game," Judy Williams says. "There's so much to love about the minors. We sit close. We get to know the players. It's special, not to mention affordable."

The Buccaneers last raised ticket prices in '92, when box seats increased \$1 to \$5 and reserved seats went up 50 cents to \$4. At the concession stand, a 16-ounce beer costs \$2.50, a hamburger \$1.50. Don't ask for hamburgers during rain.

"We don't have any because all of our people are on the field," says concessionaire Kim Wray. That includes the entire front office and Jeff Melusky, the team mascot.

Broadcaster Stu Paul, 35, a Brooklyn native, wants to make the majors some day. He has done play-by-play in Hagerstown, Md.; Jacksonville,

**Photos by Kevin Eams,
USA TODAY**

Fla.; and Eugene, Ore. A few years ago, he was a semifinalist for the No. 2 job with the Cleveland broadcast team.

"They told me I needed more experience, so here I am," says Paul.

Lazerro, 40, is in his 12th season as a minor league GM. Despite all the work — he does everything from count tickets to haul hot dogs — he doesn't want to go to the majors.

But, it's not because he gets to see a lot of baseball.

"When I pull the tarp, I have second thoughts, but that's it," Lazerro says. "I tell people if they want to see baseball, don't get a job in it. I'm usually locked in the office, counting ticket and program sales. When I want to see the team play, I go to a road game."



EASY CHOICE: Alice Williams, left, and daughter Judy of Lexington, N.C., prefer minor league games over the big leagues.

Strike not real high in players' priorities

Class A players make an average of \$1,200 a month. They are close to the strike issues, yet far away. Players say they strike because they want to pave the way for future players in the major leagues.

That's nice, Salem (Va.) Buccaneers players say, but they don't have a clear focus on the strike issues and don't say much about them.

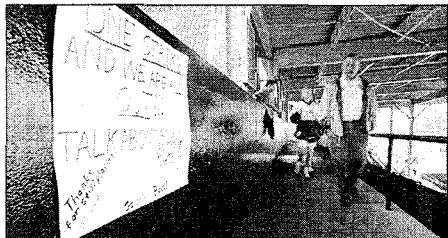
Outfielder Danny Clyburn says he's more concerned with sharpening his hitting skills to earn a promotion.

Pitcher Dave Doornewerd wants to add 5 mph to his fastball. And Marcus Hanel, 22, a solid defensive catcher who has been a professional baseball player for five years, wants to make sure the organization sees that he learned the strike zone and pumped his average 58 points.

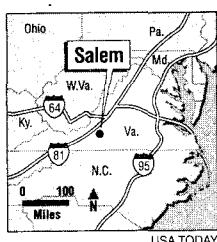
"I'm depressed to see what (Ken) Griffey, (Frank) Thomas, (Matt) Williams and (Tony) Gwynn have done go to waste, but I can't let the strike be a distraction," says infielder Mitch House. "You have to get there before you can worry."

Says manager Trent Jewell: "At this level, I'm sure they don't have a real grasp of the issues."

— Mel Antonen



ONE FAN'S OPINION: Fans walk by an anti-strike poster as they come into Municipal Stadium in Salem for a game.



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